

New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1946

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Week of November 18, 1946

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"John Gabriel Borkman"

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NEW YORK POST NEW YORK DAILY NEWS NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN

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"The Haven"



NOVEMBER 13, 1946

Kronenberger A Very Quiet Evening With A Murderer

PM Reviews

I'm not sure whether *The Haven* was intended to be a mystery, a

melodrama, or a psychological thriller; and the program, no sucker for going out on a limb, simply lists it as "a new play." But I fear that all this uncertainty spells *The Haven's* ruin, and that even "a new play" may be a somewhat excitable description of it. From being baffled by its import, one quickly proceeds to be bored: the nerves resist assault, the spine remains unprickled, and the only thing in a state of disorder is the attention.

Dennis Hoey, whose main reason for dramatizing *The Haven* was possibly the wish to appear in it, gets the play off to the sort of start that is virtually a wind-up. His villain's machinations and methods are set before the audience with a limelighting, a kind of fanfare, usually reserved for the first entrance of an internationally

famous tragedienne. You accordingly presume that, though this is a murder yarn, it is in no sense a mystery one; and await the melodrama, of which there is very little, and the psychological thrills, of which there are less. As things mosey along, it is the mystery element which vaguely reappears; that is to say, Mr. Hoey attempts that twist sometimes practiced by experts, of trying to shake your faith in what you know to be the truth—of suggesting, for a short time, that the villain may not be the real villain after all. Matters then proceed to a close.

The Haven, which is laid, by the way, in the English fen country, is no better served by its dialogue than by its drama, and taxes the capacities of a cast that includes, besides Mr. Hoey, Melville Co-

THE HAVEN.

A new play by Dennis Hoey in two acts and six scenes based on a novel by Anthony Gilbert was presented by Viola Roache and Johnnie Walker at the Playhouse last night. It was staged by Clarence Derwent with a setting by William N. Sauter.

THE CAST

Miss Martin	Viola Roache
Mrs. Hart	Queenie Leonard
Edmund Durward	Dennis Hoey
Agatha Forbes	Valerie Cossart
Arthur Cook	Melville Cooper
Grace Knowles	Eliza Sutherland
Inspector Ramsey	Charles Francis
Constable Miller	Darley Summers
Coroner	Ivan Simpson

SYNOPSIS: The action of the play takes place in "The Haven," a house in the marshy fen country of Cambridgeshire, England.
ACT I.—Scene 1. March, 1944, late afternoon.
Scene 2. May, late afternoon. Scene 3. June, mid-afternoon. ACT II.—Scene 1. August, morning. Scene 2. Two days later, early afternoon. Scene 3. Four hours later.

per, Valerie Cossart, Ivan Simpson and Viola Roache.

—LOUIS KRONENBERGER

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune
NOVEMBER 14, 1946

By HOWARD BARNES

Murdered Murder

MURDER has rarely been celebrated with such boring insistence as it is in "The Haven." Before it is halfway finished, this new melodrama by Dennis Hoey at the Playhouse has squandered its pittance of suspense. Since it has little else to recommend it, except the participation of several misguided players of the upper echelon, the final obliquities of the

whodunit are especially painful. Even the violent death of one of the principals by downing some sort of photographic developing fluid serves as a sorry resolution for a mystery show which wouldn't baffle a staunch believer in Santa Claus.

The chief mystery about the production is what tempted Mr. Hoey to translate his stodgy action from the printed page to the less anonymous focus of footlights. To be sure, the Anthony Gilbert novel offered him a leading role of sinister dimensions. It has allowed him frequent changes of tweed coats, several loping entrances and exits from a haunted house in "the marshy fen country of Cambridges-

shire, England," and a scramble of conversational clichés and bravura gestures. Hoey makes the most of the part. That is one of the least engaging things about the whole show.

With the assurance that any revelations about the exposition would in no way mar a possible spectator's surprise, this correspondent will still resolutely refrain from a synopsis of the plot. Suffice it to note that the piece jacks even the conventional creakings of a dramatic essay in mayhem and horror. Nearly all the homicidal fun takes place off-stage. The performers have a tough time making one believe

even snatches of the make-believe.

Sincere sympathy should be extended to Melville Cooper, who gallops through his lines in a desperate effort to deliver and forget them. Ivan Simpson also deserves a hollow handclap for struggling valiantly with the role of a rural coroner which almost makes tolerable an interlude in the melodrama. Queenie Leonard, who is making her first Broadway appearance in "The Haven" could scarcely have found a less comfortable refuge while Valerie Cossart and the others are game, but unavailing. Clarence Derwent's staging serves to merely emphasize the gaping inanities of the show.

DAILY NEWS

NOVEMBER 14, 1946

'The Haven' a Tepid Melodrama In One of Those English Houses

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Dennis Hoey, an actor, has written for himself a play called "The Haven" which revealed itself last evening at the Playhouse as a pleasant, gabby and not very exciting mystery melodrama, English style.

In addition to Mr. Hoey, who comports himself with more charm and modesty than might be expected of an actor-author, the com-

pany includes the deft and amusing Melville Cooper in the role of a resourceful lawyer and Queenie Leonard as the comedy maid-

servant without whom no mystery melodrama would be complete. Miss Leonard's performance of a standard part is uncommonly good.

It seems to be against the rule to tell much about the plot of a melodrama like "The Haven" and in this case it is a good rule because there wouldn't be much to tell anyway. The locale is a re-

putedly haunted house "in the marshy fen country." Mr. Hoey is a detective-story writer who has rented it.

Mr. Hoey seems to be a very queer duck, and when women begin vanishing—including the bride he has won by mail—things look fishy enough to warrant the presence of a lawyer, an inspector, a constable and a coroner. But I'd be snitching if I told you who did what to whom.

Valerie Cossart is properly pallid and worried as the correspondence bride, Viola Roache is a nosy native of the fens and Eliza Sutherland gets buried under a willow tree.

The direction is by Clarence Derwent, and Mr. Derwent has managed to keep everybody talking at a nice brisk pace. But I don't think the talk is worth keeping anybody away from home unless he is just sick of home and wants to go some place else.

The New York Times

NOVEMBER 14, 1946

Cops and Murderers

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Oops! Here comes the head of the drama copy desk, wearing his

hat as usual to protect himself against wayward drafts and with a very reasonable plea. "Say, can you go a little light tonight," he inquires confidentially. "We're really in bad shape. Asked for seven columns and only got six. I'm telling everybody to cut it as short as possible. Give me a sheet of copy paper and I'll slip a note under Downes' door."

Judge, very pleased indeed to oblige. Last evening's theatre as-

sembly celebrated the opening of a mortuary murder. "The Haven," put on at the Playhouse. Dennis Hoey wrote it out of a crime novel by Anthony Gilbert. Having the courage of his indiscretion, Mr. Hoey appeared in the cast as the chief malefactor of the evening. If "Angel Street" had not been so harrowing, it might have been as boring as "The Haven," which is a horrible thought considering how long "Angel Street" ran. For "The

Haven" is an uncommonly overpowering play, like opium, for instance.

Among those present is Melville Cooper, the comic with the droil face and the dying voice who could squeeze a laugh out of an unripe persimmon. If we all live long enough we may yet see Mr. Cooper in a play that sounds as funny as he looks.

Musn't waste space, you know, folks.

The Sun

NOVEMBER 14, 1946

'The Haven,' About Murder in the Marshes, a Dreadful Little Melodrama.

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

"The Haven" is a thriller that doesn't thrill, a murder mystery that doesn't mystify, a melodrama that never gets going. In brief, it's rather dreadful. Viola Rubber and Johnnie Walker make the presentation at the Playhouse.

The locale of this new one is the fog-bound marsh country of England's Cambridgeshire. It's all

about the troubles that come upon a pretty bride after she is taken into a spooky house by the fiendish husband she met via a matrimonial advertisement. Most of the foul business, such as the stuffing of a girl's body into a trunk, takes place off stage. The proceedings on stage are quite too poky for the chill and shudder theater.

Mary Roberts Rinehart and Avery Hopwood used to have quite a way with this sort of thing. Bayard Veiller was adept in his plotting. Owen Davis knew all the mechanics. But Dennis

Hoey, author of "The Haven," misses the trick completely.

The acting doesn't help, either. Melville Cooper, making his second appearance of the season and always welcome, bustles about, but briskness can't overcome dreary material. The attractive Valerie Cassatt uses all the restraint that is possible. Author Hoey is rather exhausting as the knavish fellow who marries girls with money and does them in. Six other paid-up members of Equity are given employment (but briefly) in the goings-on at the Playhouse. A good setting by William N. Sautter is wasted.

"The Haven" isn't scary. It's just tiresome—and silly.



NOVEMBER 14, 1946

New Play 'The Haven' A Feeble Thriller

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"The Haven" is an undistinguished thriller that adds little suspense to a well worked theme. It is saved from seeming as flat as it is by a vehement cast, which acts as if it really thought a revival of "Bluebeard" was something worth doing.

Here again is that business about love from a stranger who makes a profitable career of keeping himself a fresh widower.

The treatment makes little pretense of suspense. In fact it makes the characters who do not realize

what the audience does, seem pretty stupid.

There is a certain amount of question in the final lap as to whether the bloody Casanova can turn the tables on his neurotic wife. But she is too frail and sympathetic, not to say incredibly naive, to lose out.

Moments of Excitement.

There are also a couple of moments of real excitement, but they stem only from the immediate physical action on the stage, and not from any planned or believable situation.

The first half of the play carefully spells out the crime in detail. It leaves only one twist with which to surprise (?) the audience in the second half, as the authorities burrow after the truth.

The most remarkable feature of the evening is Melville Cooper's performance. He aims at the impossible and comes extraordinarily close to succeeding.

He treats the play as if he were giving it a transfusion of benzadrine. As a cynical lawyer who finds crime a matter of impersonal amusement, he pours out his lines at a rate that nearly equals Gertrude Krupa's drumming.

Tries to Make It Funny.

It is as if he realized the conversation was not particularly enlightening, but was out to make you think that a lot of it was very funny.

With pace, inflections and timing, he gives the impression of playing a really witty part. It almost fools a listener. Unfortunately the laughs are actually miles apart.

Dennis Hoey, who wrote the play from a novel, is an imposing and sinister villain of the piece. There is no fooling about what he is up to, as all the stops are

out.

Valerie Cassatt gives his victim delicacy and harassed charm. It is a wishy-washy and not very convincing part, but she gives the action a boost when she first suspects her husband, and she handles the inquest scene well.

A Striking Witch.

Eliza Sutherland is a striking witch as Miss Cassatt's half sister who precipitates the trouble, then disappears before she can get her bearings.

Queenie Leonard gets all she can out of the role of a maid. She and Viola Roache as a bluff, suspicious landlady, give the impression that they could punch the devil out of a few funny lines, if they only had them.

Ivan Simpson grabs a laugh or two as a coroner, and similarly looks deprived.

"The Haven" has the transparency and the simplicity of dialogue that characterize the popular dastardly comic strips. It is the kind of play that will appeal only to the most glib and undiscriminating readers of purported thrillers.

"The Haven"—continued

New York Post

NOVEMBER 14, 1946

Murder Proves Dull Subject In Drama Called 'The Haven'

By Richard Watts Jr.

There is something fascinating about the propensity of English actors to picture themselves as debonair murderers. Leave a pencil or typewriter within reach of a West End thespian and you tempt him to a play in which he is a cool killing his wives or cutting off old ladies' heads and carrying them in hat boxes. Always, by some coincidence, the dramas are so written that when the hero-villain is not moving about ominously the minor players are busy talking about how charming he is and how irresistible to the women.

In the immediate prewar days two of the most celebrated examples of this curious school of psychic self-portraiture were "Night Must Fall," in which Evelyn Williams wrote himself the juicy role of a homicidal bellboy with a passion for decapitation, and "Love From a Stranger," in

which the late Frank Vosper devised for his own use the character of a mysterious gentleman who went around strangling brides for their money. It was the latter melodrama that seems chiefly to have struck the fancy of Dennis Hoey, author and leading actor of "The Haven," which opened at the Playhouse last night.

Based on Novel

At least, Mr. Hoey, basing his activities on a murder novel by one Anthony Gilbert, is to be encountered as a cryptic adventurer who woos wealthy and gullible women, takes their fortunes and

does away with them. How he is somehow side-tracked by being forced to kill an unnecessary half-sister and is finally confounded by a comic attorney and some bad luck with a bottle of poison is the substance of the new and exceptionally tedious murder play.

Since this is the type of pseudo-sophisticated melodrama which scorns any idea of being mysterious, there is no attempt to deceive you about this Edmund Duward that Mr. Hoey plays. You have only to see how every minor figure in "The Haven" shakes his head grimly, looks about him fearfully and gives every sign of being thoroughly terrified whenever it is mentioned that this dubious stranger has lived in the Far East to realize that the fellow is a baleful character.

Indeed, the mention of so sinister a place as Singapore sends the people of the play into such agonies of apprehension that anyone who has ever so much as set foot on the continent of Asia is likely to feel that he must be pretty adventurous himself, or else a potential wife-murderer.

His Achievements

There isn't much that is good to be said about "The Haven,

save that what it does it achieves with fine completeness, whether it be the simple business of boring the spectator or the more difficult task of including all the clichés of its school. What, for example, do you suppose the police do when they search the house called "The Haven" for evidence? Why, they go over it with a fine-tooth comb, of course. Ask Frank Sullivan.

One at least moderately serious thought does arise in connection with the new play. Fiction, the movies, even the comic strips manage to provide murder mysteries of considerable skill with a reasonable degree of regularity. Yet somehow the stage, which used to be so expert in this agreeable form of storytelling, is utterly ineffectual about it these days. It seems a shame.

The acting in "The Haven" is about what might be expected. Mr. Hoey has a lot of fun as the murderer, Valeria Cossart plays the victimized wife with agreeable sincerity, Melville Cooper makes the lawyer passably comic and Ivan Simpson provides a real characterization as a confused coroner. Their play is a very feeble exercise in crime.

Journal of the American

NOVEMBER 14, 1946

Report to Playgoers On Latest Showpiece

By ROBERT GARLAND

DATE: November 13, 1946.

TITLE OF PLAY: "The Haven."

AUTHOR: Dennis Hoey.

SOURCE: Anthony Gilbert novel.

PRODUCERS: Viola Rubber, Johnnie Walker.

THEATRE: The Playhouse.

DIRECTOR: Clarence Derwent.

DESIGNER: William Saulter.

PLAYERS (featured): Melville Cooper, Valeria Cossart, Queenie Leonard, Viola Roache, Ivan Simpson, Mr. Hoey.

PLAYERS (non-featured): Eliza Sutherland, Charles Francis, Darby Summers, Off-Stage Screamers, Cat (invisible).

LOCALE: A house, called "The Haven," in the marshy fen country of Cambridgeshire (England).

CREDITS: Costumes, Noel Taylor; scenery, Reisig and Center; electrical equipment, Duwico; sound effects, Masque; hair-styles, Charles of the Ritz (Mr. Hoey's perhaps excepted); furni-

ture, Encore; carpets, Hotel and Theatre Carpet-Layers.

STAFF: Company manager, Harold Harris; press representatives, Phyllis Teriman, Marian Byram; stage manager, Charles Parsons; assistant stage manager, Martin Blum; assistant to Miss Rubber, Adrian Larkin; master carpenter, Louis Yeager; master of properties, David Parmenter; master electrician, Michael Burns.

WHISPERER (in dark): "I wonder if I can get my passes back?"

NOTATION: Deodorizing air purifiers, liquid soap dispensing system, by Creco Company.

ADVICE: Patrons should take their coats and hats with them whenever they leave their seats.

SUGGESTION: Exit indicated by red light is shortest route to street (and bars in immediate neighborhood).

PLEA: It is urged that patrons

refrain from lighting matches in the auditorium as it distracts the actors.

STATEMENT (from press-representatives): Dennis Hoey deserves a special accolade because he is the author as well as the pivotal character in "The Haven."

CREDIT: Valeria Cossart inherits the acting talents of Ernest Cossart (her father).

EXPLANATION: Queenie Leonard is a refugee from Hollywood, making her first Broadway appearance at the Playhouse.

SELF-ESTEEM: Eliza Sutherland considers herself "an actress of three countries" (Canada, England, America).

SELF-CONFIDENCE: Melville Cooper feels equally at ease in motion-pictures, musical-comedy or straight drama (neither of which includes "The Haven").

APOLOGY: Charles Francis met Dennis Hoey in a movie.

DECISION: Ivan Simpson has stopped counting his on-stage appearances.

INFORMATION: Viola Roache studied at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (London).

WHISPERER (in dark): Kiltroy was here—but beat it!

QUESTION: Is Dennis Hoey, the playwright, trying to get even with Dennis Hoey, the actor?

SECOND THOUGHT: Or is Dennis Hoey, the actor, trying to get even with Dennis Hoey, the playwright?

COMMENT (in lobby): The

morning paper critics are going to have a tough time thinking up something good to say about this one.

OPINION (on sidewalk): A mystery play without mystery; a melodrama without drama; a thriller without thrills; a good reason for coming home: a—

INTERROGATION: Who ever called that actor a playwright?

ANOTHER: Who ever called that playwright an actor?

INSIDE INFORMATION: Those screamers in G Row Center are relatives of the author-actor, carrying on.

MORE OF SAME: They're members of "The Glass Menagerie" company, screaming for their theatre.

STILL MORE: They're the Pulitzer people screaming for a booby prize.

AND MORE: They're backers, screaming for their backing.

AUDIENCE REACTION (after final curtain): "A new low water mark from which to measure." "They should have closed the show before it opened." "They ought to have let it lay in Philadelphia." "They—"

CRITICAL OPINION (of Robert Garland): Heaven help the show-goer on a night like this. Any resemblance to the Viola Rubber-Johnnie Walker-Dennis Hoey "The Haven" may have to a play, or to any desirable form of the theatrical entertainment, is co-incidental.

WHISPER (in dark): Cat's Warehouse, take it away!

"John Gabriel Borkman"

New York Post

NOVEMBER 13, 1946

American Repertory Presents 'John Gabriel Borkman'

By Richard Watts Jr.

For its third production within a week, the extremely energetic American Repertory Theatre last night presented Ibsen's chill and brooding "John Gabriel Borkman," and for

the first time proved worthy of the hopes that had been placed in it. For reasons not difficult to understand, this ruminative study of the living dead has long been a favorite with Miss Le Gallienne. Its bleak and constricted emotions and its grim sense of passion spent seem to fit in perfectly with the specialized qualities of her acting and have been communicated so strikingly to her associates that this low-pitched but oddly arresting drama of anti-climax took on an absorbing sense of power and truth. This is the new company justifying itself.

Grayness of Texture

For all its conscious monotony

and grayness of texture, "John Gabriel Borkman," properly done, has a haunting and inescapable fascination. Its very form, which might seem to go contrary to the nature of drama, adds to the interest that is inherent in it. For this lesser known work of the great Norwegian begins when everything is over for its central characters and they are already spiritually and emotionally dead. Life has ended for Borkman, the industrialist whose empire has crashed, as well as for his unloved wife and the twin sister who has loved him and been deserted; the drama consists in watching what is left of their ex-

istence ebb from them slowly.

It is in one key and it drifts off into a kind of midnight gloom, but even though it seems to recede from drama rather than move forward into it, the play rarely ceases to be dramatically striking; Ibsen sees his characters with a kind of cold and objective compassion, and he presents them so completely that, dead and dying, they yet paradoxically achieve dramatic life.

It is so much a play of mood, and the mood is so studiously dark, cold and half-lighted, that

the result could easily be tedious and aimless. So it is all the more pleasant to report that the new company, which didn't show a great deal of resource in its two earlier presentations, manages everything here with skill and understanding. From Paul Morrison's settings, which capture the proper atmospheric quality, to the acting, which is complete and satisfying, "John Gabriel Borkman" is happily served in production.

Certainly this is the finest performance that Miss Le Gallienne has offered this season. Margaret Webster, who doesn't usually

'JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN.'

Play by Henrik Ibsen; direction, translation and production scheme by Eva Le Gallienne; scenery and costumes by Paul Morrison; musical arrangement by Lehman Engel; presented by the American Repertory Theatre, Inc., at the International Theatre Tuesday evening, November 12, 1946. The cast: Mrs. Borkman—Margaret Webster; Ella Renthelm, her sister—Eva Le Gallienne; Malene, her maid—Marion Looman; Erhart Borkman, her son—William Windom; Mrs. Panny Wilton—Mary Alice Moore; John Gabriel Borkman—Victor Jory; Frida Foldal—Ann Jackson; Vilhelm Foldal—Ernest Truex.

STORYLINE—The action takes place on a winter evening at the Renthelm family estate, in the neighborhood of Christiania (Oslo), about 1880. The action is continuous throughout the five scenes of the play.

seem as able an actress as she is a director, is admirable as Borkman's wife, while Victor Jory's Borkman, while not altogether satisfying, has the proper strength. Mary Alice Moore, who is one of the pleasant memories

of "What Every Woman Knows," is excellent as the play's one gay lady, and Ernest Truex helps with a touching sentimental portrait of a loyal follower. The American Repertory Theatre has finally found itself.

Journal of the American

NOVEMBER 13, 1946

'Borkman' Revived At International

By ROBERT GARLAND

In their current reproductions of unimportant plays by important playwrights, the American Repertory Theatre's revivalists last night worked their way around to "John Gabriel Borkman" and Henrik Ibsen. Following William Shakespeare's "Henry VIII" and James Barrie's "What Every Woman Knows," preceding Bernard Shaw's "Androcles and the Lion" and Richard Sheridan's "The School for Scandal," it is a bore.

I'd not be too much surprised if Eva Le Gallienne, a guiding thespian in the American Repertory outfit, were responsible for the digging up of this one. Year in, year out, since 1926, she's had a yen for Henrik Ibsen's "John Gabriel Borkman," pretending, at

the drop of a backer's disapproval, to be the long-suffering Ella Renthelm, she is once more in the International Theatre right up near Central Park.

Twenty years ago, uptown and down, Egon Brecher was her own John Gabriel. Now, after two decades, her own John Gabriel is Victor Jory. With a straight face and a grim determination, he suffers right along with her until he expires from sheer exhaustion on Paul Morrison's second-best mountain top. And, as good as Mr. Jory's on-stage performance was, June Dupre's was better down among the audience.

Woe Is Woe

When something is too silly to

be said, they sing it. "John Gabriel Borkman" would make an excellent opera. In the harsh light of present-day reality, the Henrik Ibsen story of a family's fool frustrations is more than a little singable. These woe-is-meers, woe-is-me-ing on the frosty outskirts of Norway's Christiania—Oslo to you and me—are out of this world. And they certainly should be!

You don't care a bit about the Borkman who married a Renthelm, the Renthelm who didn't marry a Borkman, and the Erhart who is a Borkman by birth and a Renthelm by inclination. You don't care a bit as they sit around the old Norwegian homestead and talk and talk about their mental, moral and marital operations. Woe is them! Woe is you! Woe is the actors who have to speak their lines!

But speak their lines they do. And some of their lines are pretty hard to speak. And most of their lines are pretty hard to take. And all of their lines are pretty hard to believe. As, in five acts and without an intermission, John Gabriel Borkman dies in scene by scene of love, loneliness and self pity, you feel like rising in your seat to ask "So what!" If you did, the show would be good and over!

Plays to Players

But, up on Columbus Circle, nobody rises in his seat to ask "So what?" Instead, the actors act their Equity hearts out, especially the aforesaid Victor Jory as the aforesaid John Gabriel Borkman. With no single Henry VIII whisker to hide behind, he does succeed in keeping his face straight and his determination grim, as has been noted. An Egon Brecher could have done no more!

Margaret Webster, the company's second guiding thespian, begins well but gets no better as the Mrs. John Gabriel Borkman who is Ella Renthelm's married sister. Ernest Truex is not yet at home as Vilhelm Foldal. But he's still on hand, waiting for his repertorial innings as the Androcles who dearly loves his lion. William Windom is the family's fine fur-bearing son.

And I guess that's all. Save for the fact that "John Gabriel Borkman" will be repeated by the American Repertory revivalists today, tomorrow and Friday. Why, I'm not prepared to say. For my passes, I'll take "Blue Jeans," "The Heart of Maryland" or "Shenandoah." I'm afraid the American Repertory Theatre is fitting its plays to its players, instead of the other way around. No should do!

"John Gabriel Borkman"—continued



NOVEMBER 14, 1944

Kronenberger Ibsen Comes Partly Alive

PM Reviews

John Gabriel Borkman is by no means first-rate Ibsen, and the present production has a great big hole right in the center of it. Yet it provides, for all that, much the best of three evenings that the American Repertory Theater has offered so far. It provides indeed an interesting evening, for the simple reason that it remains an interesting play, one that has power in it and a sense of power behind it. It is Ibsen in de-

cline, but still very clearly Ibsen.

All this somehow emerges in spite of the fact that the all-important title role of the play is completely unrealized—is performed, as it were, behind a long black hood. It's not merely that Borkman, in the theater sense, must dominate the action, and in this case doesn't. It's also that he is the play's one really powerful and expanding figure, and on Tuesday night never assumed his proper shape, let alone size. Victor Jory played this materialist-mystic, this crushed seeker after titanic power, rather as though Borkman were some embittered old-school tragedian who could no longer get work. And being all tragedian, he was not in the least tragic. He sought to project the husk of a man simply by adhering to a manner; and the manner seemed as overdone as the man seemed under-nourished. It is quite true that Borkman sees himself histrionically—the only drama left to him is self-dramatization; but that is something that must be conveyed in sidelong fashion, not by using a heavily histri-

onic style.

But badly dented as it is, most of the play still takes hold of you. It is a play in which action is over and that much more significant thing, reaction, has set in. It reflects the double tragedy of a man who lost his own soul while failing to gain the whole world; a man who sacrificed love to power and got neither. In Borkman's case the lust for power amounts to a kind of cosmic vision of power, which is why the particular man rises so far above the general type. When we meet him, he has spent years in prison and even longer years of ostracism and self-immolation, and has blighted the lives of both the woman he married and the woman he should have married. Only his self-centered son manages to crawl out of the net; for Borkman and the others, it is much too late.

Ibsen's technique fails him toward the end of the play, and even inwardly it dissolves on too straightforwardly moral a note: its ideas, though true to Ibsen's mind,

lose all their own flesh. Furthermore, several of the characters surrounding Borkman are a little too squarely cast in set "roles," to form a rather old-fashioned kind of thematic pattern. Yet Ibsen has endowed them all with character, and made them vibrant in conflict; and his world of emptied lives and ended hopes, handled as it is with stern understanding, still has power and meaning. It would have more of both if its people could be the beneficiaries of a better translation, and could talk—as now they often don't—like human beings.

With Mr. Jory no Borkman, the real interest centered Tuesday night in the two women, in Miss LeCallienne's Ella Rentheim and Margaret Webster's Gunhild Borkman. There were things to complain of; but their acting had the large virtue of solidly registering, of giving the play a certain needed force and drive. Ernest Truex plays quietly and at moments touchingly as Fokald; most of the minor parts leave something to be desired.

—LOUIS KRONENBERGER



New York World Telegram

NOVEMBER 13, 1944

'Borkman' a Study of Brooding Hatred

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"I did it and I'm glad," is what the American Repertory Theater should be saying today about its revival of Henrik Ibsen's "John Gabriel Borkman" last night.

There are bound to be queries on the general subject of why anyone should do it at all.

The play is representative of one of the significant and substantial playwrights of dramatic literature, and it is seldom seen. That is enough answer for a repertory company.

This play would never be written now. Given the premise of such a gloomy bitter group, living lives of hatred, a modern writer would inevitably turn out a psychological thriller, or an out-and-out mystery.

Not for the Frivolous.

Ibsen makes a serious tragedy of a few hours' outburst which brings to a head 30 years of ugly brooding. Looked at objectively, the play has a certain might about it, though it certainly is not entertainment for the frivolous.

Borkman, an egomaniac in love with power, has been caught misusing funds in the bank where he

worked. After 30 prison terms, he spends years in one room of his house, never seeing his wife or anyone else, except a little poet whom he dominates.

His sister-in-law, Ella, the twin of his wife comes to the house to beg for her beloved nephew for the few remaining months she will live. Ella had brought up the boy in the years after his father's disgrace, and his mother, in jealousy, has made every effort turn her son, Erhart, against his aunt.

It is the bitter struggle between the two women for the youth, that brings to a head all the brooding hatred in the family.

Ella finds that Borkman really had loved her, but given her up to a rival who could benefit his career. She had never married the rival, who in turn was responsible for Borkman's ruin.

The boy spurns both the possessive women to seek his own happiness with a girl they disapprove of. Borkman, in a sort of swan song of vigor, sees himself capable of starting over again to seek his kingdom of power, but dies in the sudden hysterical effort.

The role of Borkman is too much on the edge of madness to seem very believable. One must constantly remind himself that this is a man who has already spent almost a quarter of a century alone with a devastating disappointment.

Stiff and Vain.

Victor Jory makes him as stiff, quick tempered and inconsiderately vain as he would have to be. But he is not able to make him really very interesting until the last two scenes.

Then in a kind of vision of his first hopes, he captures the youthful excitement and glow of ambition that explains the man through his consuming desire.

Eva Le Gallienne plays Ella, a sympathetic character against dark backgrounds. She makes her tender and drained, and is most convincing in her regret at the tragic waste of her life.

Margaret Webster is the cold and viciously demanding Mrs. Borkman. It is a stately performance, though her emotional outbursts seem too contained and deliberate. They lack fire and violence that ought to burst loose

from such a pent-up woman.

There are several smaller parts excellently played. Ernest Truex makes a wistful, pathetic little poet as the one man who still idolizes Borkman. It is a delicate portrayal of wavery, eager sensitivity.

Breeze of Normality.

Mary Alice Moore, as Erhart's real love, is a fresh breeze of normality in the sordid atmosphere. Her Mrs. Wilton has a dewy wisdom, innate sophistication and a sense of humor.

Ann Jackson is effective in a bit as a musical student, and William Windom plays the rebellious son, Erhart.

Miss Le Gallienne has given the play a subdued flow with this production. No one can get around the fact that it is very talky, and that for long passages there is nothing for the characters to do but sit and listen.

The continuous action is linked by quick scene changes without intermission, and there is a very effective musical transition between the first two scenes that establishes this house as a nerve-racking place.

"John Gabriel Borkman"—continued

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune

NOVEMBER 13, 1946

— By HOWARD BARNES —

Cold Night in the Theater

STUBBORN affection is evident in the revival of "John Gabriel Borkman," third of the present offerings by the American Repertory Theater. The rescue of the Ibsen drama from comparative neglect has been effected with more pains than flourish at the International Theater. Eva Le Gallienne, who presented the tragedy twenty years ago, is responsible for the current direction, translation, production scheme and the chief acting. She

has succeeded in conjuring up a brooding and monotonous intensity and fragments of poetry. Even without an intermission, they scarcely suffice for a sustained or illuminating theatrical experience.

The new repertory group has been none too wise in its selection of plays. "John Gabriel Borkman" has a certain fascination in its probing of character and its relentless exposition of Ibsen's thesis that the killing of love is the most heinous of crimes. It has moments of tragic magnificence as a dead man and two feminine shadows are posed in ultimate defeat. But the somber atmosphere and gestures are, at best, oppressive. As interpreted at the International in something less than a flawless production, they are try-

ing.

The very fact that Miss Le Gallienne dominates the drama throws it out of focus. The tragedy of Ella, whose love for Borkman is sacrificed in his lust for power, is made very real and moving in her eloquent portrayal. The fundamental and awful terror of his living death is rarely realized in the stilted performance of Victor Jory. He tramps up and down his lonely room like a sick wolf, dreaming of new industrial conquests and clasps his heart in the cold and steel grip of the death scene, but his Borkman is neither touching nor arresting. Margaret Webster is far better in her careful portrayal of a bitter wife.

The play is touched briefly by the dignity and grandeur that runs like a thin vein of precious metal through its murky corridors. Ernest Truex in the part of Vilhelm, one of Ibsen's finest lesser characters, is superb. He plays the loyal friend of the embezzler, who is denied even one man's faith in his poetic talent with wonderfully restrained passion. It is a performance to remember in a revival which is not at all memorable. Mary Alice Moore is a bit too lusty as the wench who lures the Borkman son away and William Windom is very uncertain of himself as the son. "John Gabriel Borkman" does not enhance the first cycle of the American Repertory Theater.

The New York Times

NOVEMBER 12, 1946

THE PLAY

By BROOKS ATKINSON

In its third production the American Repertory Theatre has fairly come into its own. It is dedicating an inspired performance to Ibsen's "John Gabriel Borkman," which was revived in the Columbus Circle playhouse last evening. On a playbill Ibsen's bitter reverie about nineteenth-century "pipe-dreams" may look less glamorous than "Henry VIII" or "What Every Woman Knows." But if the proof of a play's vitality lies in the acting, put "John Gabriel Borkman" down as a tone-poem written out of Ibsen's angry passion, and dub the current performance a masterpiece.

• • •
An old hand at Ibsen, Miss Le Gallienne has made the translation

and directed the performance. Towards the end Ibsen's venerable drama does give off a few turgid sentiments that now smack of soporific melodrama. When John Gabriel Borkman faces death, he consoles himself with a word or two of old-fashioned bombast. But that is the only sign of literary age in this bitter chronicle of a household of baleful illusions. For "Borkman" is a powerful, compact drama written by a scornful enemy of romantic drama. Ibsen has no mercy on the characters of his own begetting. "Borkman" is a vengeful dance on the graves of the dead.

Under Miss Le Gallienne's direction, the American Repertory actors are giving it a vibrant performance with the rhythm of a dance of death and the tone of a song of doom. With the parts beautifully modulated and the pace swift and biting, the performance is a work in black magic.

• • •
Acting the part of the malvolent Mrs. Borkman, Margaret Webster is superb. As in the case of her acting in "The Sea Gull" several years ago, now we know

that her success as a director has cost us a splendid actress. In the early scenes of "Borkman" Miss Webster sets the pitch for the whole performance by the hatred she crowds into the character; and she drives forward through every scene, stunned occasionally when Mrs. Borkman sees her world of illusion crumbling, but always recovering the strength of an evil genius for destroying the people she loves.

As Mrs. Borkman's broken though tenacious sister, Miss Le Gallienne's portrayal is an excellent counterpart—thin, weary, haggard, but fiery in spirit. Miss Le Gallienne's acting as usual is most exhilarating when it remains within a narrow compass of gestures and motion. In contrast with Miss Webster's full and commanding acting, it gives "Borkman" the depth and range of contrasted themes in a piece of music.

• • •
Victor Jory's portrait of the fatalistic Borkman establishes him as a stage actor of first-rate quality. Borkman pacing the room where he is incarcerated, Borkman

declaiming his mad obsessions, tormenting his inferiors, dissecting his own soul, berating those who love him—all the megalomania Mr. Jory accomplishes with force and hard-bitten imagination.

As the modest clerk who of all the people in "Borkman" is the only one to save his soul, Ernest Truex is giving a beautifully gentle performance with complete integrity of character. William Windom plays the son pleasantly, though his good manners take precedence over the torment of the character; and Mary Alice Moore gives a somewhat rigid performance as the loose Mrs. Fanny Wilton.

As the scene designer Paul Morrison has provided rooms that echo the vengeful theme of the play and that respond to atmospheric lighting. The virtuosos Lehman Engel has whipped up a few delicate chords to open and conclude the performance. What with one thing and another the American Repertory version of "John Gabriel Borkman" is a briskly etched work of theatre art. Only reckless players will want to miss it.

The Sun

NOVEMBER 12, 1946

'John Gabriel Borkman,' Ably Acted, Beat of the Three Repertory Offerings.

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

They've dusted off the fifty-year-old "John Gabriel Borkman" up at the Circle, and for an hour and fifty minutes last night, without an intermission, the American Repertory Theater devoted itself to the playing of Ibsen's bitter and somber drama. It's a play that offers moments of vital theater and it brings forth the best performances of the A. R. T. to date.

In "John Gabriel Borkman," a study of doomed and wretched people, Eva Le Gallienne is working with a play she knows well, and one for which she has feel-

ing and deep understanding. She made the translation, prepared the production scheme and did the direction, and she contributes an uncommonly good characteri-

zation of the sick and thwarted spinster, Ella Rentheim, whose life has been one of protracted desolation.

It's not for pleasure, Ibsen's story of the money-mad Borkman, who renounced love for an uncontrollable pursuit of wealth and power, came to ruin, served a jail term, and finally died in the snow. It's a play of gnawing and sustained bitterness, of half-dead people living out their shadowy lives—a slow-moving drama of almost unbroken gloom.

But it has been well staged and the players at the International go about their playing with considerably more skill than they brought to either "Henry VIII" or "What Every Woman Knows." They've succeeded in turning the weighty old drama into steadily engrossing theater.

Victor Jory is grim and believable as the tragic Borkman, given to bewailing the errors of

his life as he shuts himself in for eight long years, pacing his upstairs room like a sick wolf. Margaret Webster is thoroughly convincing as the bitter and glacial wife, determined to win back the family's good name. Ernest Truex is a human and rather touching figure as Foldal, the frustrated poet. Mary Alice Moore is sharp and assured as the flamboyant hussey, Mrs. Wilton. And there is an effective performance from William Windom as the son of the unhappy Borkman, the Elhart who wants a life of his own. Good settings and costumes have been supplied by Paul Morrison.

The American Repertory Theater strikes its stride in "John Gabriel Borkman." It's an austere and troubled drama that has, for all its gloom, a good deal of poignance and vitality when well played. And it is now getting such playing in Columbus Circle.